

48

**ASHELY
LEDFORD**

IN DARKNESS

Fiction

It wasn't the reaction he expected. She was supposed to be confused at first, to ask him why the windows were covered and all the lights were off. He was to offer a clue, remind her they saw this once on CSI and she thought it would be an interesting experience. Then she was to recall the episode and say how amazing it was that he remembered.

"Happy first anniversary," Tad said.

But Joselyn, his wife, said nothing. He pictured her oval face propped up by a slender hand, her brows, one pierced, arching above earthen green eyes. She had just showered—a nice gesture after spending the last couple of hours training the neighborhood canines—so her wet hair fell in long, black walnut tangles down her shoulders and back, soaking her oversized Kent State T-shirt. Hers was so unlike his own hair, thick African curls he inherited from his mother.

His cooking had warmed the kitchen to a cozier temperature than the November chill outside, and from the table the aroma of garlic, blue cheese dressing, naval oranges, and oregano rose with the steam. The CD she had surprised Tad with that morning, *Nat King Cole Sings for Two in Love*, crooned, set on random, from the counter. The voice and instruments were clear, much less grainy than in the old record Tad had listened to growing up. She always knew what to get him.

"Did you forget to light the candles?" Joselyn asked.

"There are no candles," he said.

"Then...how are we supposed to see to eat?"

"We're not. That's the surprise." Tad reached for her hand but found only a napkin, the paper ridged like Braille. He sang to her instead, his voice much less smooth than Nat King Cole. "There will be many other nights like this..."

"Why?" Joselyn asked.

"Because we're going to be together until death do us part."

She laughed. "I meant, why are we eating like this?" Her tone hit a step above its normal pitch, as if a musician had missed an accidental. "I mean, it smells good, but..."

He couldn't see if she was still smiling, one side of her mouth raised slightly higher than the other, or if she was pinching the skin on her elbow, a sign of irritation, nervousness. He was about to give her the CSI clue when she spoke again.

"What did you make?"

Smiling.

Yes, I may dream a million dreams/ but how can they come true/ if there will never, ever be another you? And there wouldn't be. Joselyn didn't want kids.

"To your left are two celery sticks stuffed with cheese. Then there are

five jalapeño chicken wraps, an orange vegetable kabob, and an Italian round. I poured you milk, but it's in a coffee cup."

"Milk to curb the zest and a coffee cup to prevent an accident, nice. But why do we have to eat in the...Ah, the CSI episode."

The backrest of the kitchen chair huffed as Tad leaned onto it.

She remembered. "Actually the restaurant they based it off of is in California. Los Angeles, San Diego, and somewhere else."

"That's...special," Joselyn said.

I had my chance/ but it's all over now... Perhaps this wasn't the best CD to set the mood.

Dog tags jingled under the table and a warm back pressed against Tad's leg. Beowulf, Joselyn's brindled Irish wolfhound, believed the kitchen table was her dog house. Tad had protested at first; the silly beast bonked her head every time she stood up. But Joselyn said Beowulf had always lain under the table in her parents' house, and she'd done the same thing when Joselyn moved her to the apartment in Canton, so why should their house in Dannersby be any different?

Why indeed. Joselyn probably had her bare feet buried in the wolfhound's wiry fur.

Tad moved his legs. "I know I can't take credit for originality, but you said it would be an interesting experience."

"You do realize that somebody died eating this way," she said, the odd pitch returning.

"In the restaurant?" He had viewed a few reviews online. No one had written anything about that.

"On CSI."

"Someone always dies on CSI."

"Sure, but...I think I could enjoy the food more with the lights on."

The table shook. Joselyn or Beowulf must have bumped it.

"But the point is to heighten your senses," Tad said. "It's like being blind. Touch, smell, and taste become—"

She inhaled as if she were about to enter a tunnel. "Tad, I—I'd just feel better if—"

"But you like things to be dark, creepy, and weird. I thought you'd like it. You said it would be—"

"Interesting, yes, but I never thought you'd actually do it."

She never thought he would do it. That's what she had said nearly five years ago, the day before Christmas break when he stood in Kent State's library, presenting her with the eyebrow piercing she'd said she wanted, the silver dog bone. Joselyn hadn't accepted it then, though. She was dating someone else. He'd known that, of course, but they could still be friends, couldn't they? She said friends didn't kneel when they exchanged gifts, but he only knelt because she was sitting down and he was 6'3".

He saved the piercing, though. She broke up with her jerk boyfriend sometime during the break, and once the spring semester began, she

agreed to go with him to The Steaming Mug for its famous hot cocoa, which Tad knocked over on the table. Joselyn laughed, and helped him clean it up. She said she'd never met a man who liked Jane Austen and rock climbing. And he had never encountered a woman who could discuss the historical satire in Gulliver's Travels as easily as she could sensory receptors in a gray wolf. On Valentine's Day, Tad took her to the climbing wall at Hawkins Park, and as they dangled suspended from cables, he re-presented the silver dog bone.

"I can't believe you kept that," she said, taking out the other piercing and replacing it with his gift. She'd worn it ever since.

The meal, however, he couldn't save for three months.

Tad pressed his palms against the table. "I'll go turn on the lights."

"No, wait. I feel bad. You worked so hard on this." Another tunnel breath. The table shook as if from a 2.6 earthquake.

"Joselyn? Are you okay?"

"Let's just eat," she said. "The food's getting cold."

He reached for his milk, but his fingers landed in the blue cheese dressing. Tad cursed inwardly, found his napkin, and wiped off the dressing. He thought he was past this. She hadn't been disappointed with a gift since he had paid to have her eyebrow pierced for a second time. The woman nearly pierced Joselyn's eye, which required two stitches at the corner of her eyelids. She still had the scar.

"So how are the books?" she asked.

Tad smiled, pulling an orange slice off the skewer. She'd coined that question after they started dating. He'd been an assistant librarian then at Kent State. He now worked for Dannersby Public Library. Despite the dark, the orange didn't taste sweeter or tangier, just like a Food Lion orange.

"Dusty," he said. "I'm still working through the box Mr. Kilmore donated."

"I thought you—Ow! Did you put toothpicks in these wraps?"

He twirled the accused food, the pick splintering between his thumb and index finger. "To keep the bacon on. Sorry. Are you okay? Are you bleeding?"

"I don't think so. All I can taste is garlic."

"Is it too much?"

Maybe she's not to blame/ leave me with silent hours...

"No, it's fine," she said off-pitch. "Everything's fine."

Dinner for one please, James...It certainly would have been more successful. He should have just bought her Loveopoly. She liked regular Monopoly. Didn't she?

The table still vibrated. Tad moved his arm from the table and bit into the Italian round. The butter had solidified over the cheese and garlic powder. He swallowed hard and dropped the rest beneath the table. Beowulf shifted from side to belly, her tags jingling. He couldn't see Joselyn, the scar that bunched in the corner of her eye, her elbow propped on the table, and he didn't know how much of her hair had dried or where she rested her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" she said a little louder than necessary. "The food's great, Tad. Thank you. It's nice."

The shaking amplified to a 4.2.

"Can you please stop? I don't want my food to end up in the floor."

"I'm sorry. It's just Wulf's taking up most of the leg room, so when I move my leg, the table shakes. We should probably invest in a sturdier one anyway. I mean, I know this table's special to you. I'd hate for Wulf to break it."

Tad's grandfather had made the table with scrap oak from his employer's lumberyard. She had loved the table when they moved it into the house. Did she not like it now?

You stepped out of a dream/ you are too wonderful/ to be what you seem... Had Joselyn always been this fickle? She liked dark things, but now she didn't; liked the table, but now it was too fragile; thought he was the best thing to happen to her—was she beginning to reconsider? Or had she just settled when she said yes before the justice of the peace, rain dripping off the roof of the pavilion?

"I can't please you." His voice was small, like the bit of red pepper on the kabob skewer.

"What?"

"I can't please you," he said more loudly, peering at the invisible woman across from him.

"But I'm the one shaking—"

"The table's not good enough; the food's too pungent. You don't like my gifts to you. I can't give you what you want."

"Don't be like this, Tad."

"I don't know how else to be."

"What are you saying?"

He rested an arm on the table, now still. "Why didn't you want to eat in the dark?"

"It's not that I didn't want to. I appreciate your efforts, Tad, but I..."

"What, do you have to check the food before you eat it?"

A thousand thoughts of you/ will haunt me ever after... He would put this CD in his desk drawer and never listen to it again.

"You know Aunt Chris was blind," she said quietly.

His diaphragm stretched, pulled, and twisted beneath his ribs. Tad shut his eyes and propped his head against his hand, the grease from his fingers slicking his skin. Joselyn and her aunt had been close, spending every Sunday afternoon at the dining table working puzzles, a habit they continued even after her aunt developed a genetic eye disorder that deteriorated the cones and rods in her retinas. After three years, Aunt Chris became legally blind. She died two months ago from pancreatic cancer. How had he not made the connection?

"Dr. Sobczak said your eyes were fine," Tad said.

"For now."

His hand thumped against the table, and he leaned back against the chair, mouthing the words of Nat King Cole, *Your face/ your smile/ the moonlight in your hair/ your lips/ your eyes/ I'll see them everywhere...* He was an idiot, a simpleton.

"I'll get the lights," Joselyn said.

"No, I'll get them." He stood.

Her chair scraped across the floor. "I'm closer. It won't—"

Dog skull cracked against the bottom of the table, and the dishes clanged, followed by a yelp and shout, crash and thud, and one final crack of wood on linoleum. Nails clicked thickly and were gone. The CD player whirred, and Nat King Cole sang no more.

"Joselyn?" His chest warmed with adrenaline.

"I'm fine, tripped over Beowulf."

"Anything broken?" She didn't curse. That was a good sign.

"Just get the lights."

Tad pulled the chair back, waving his outstretched hands as he walked around the table. His hand traced the side of the fridge, sticking to a picture, the only one on that side. Joselyn sat in a tire swing at Hawkins Park. She was laughing, clinging to the chains as she spun, hair sweeping after her. But the camera had only captured a whirl of streaks, slowed motion. Beneath his hand, the picture was just a different texture in the dark.

When he could see again, would her head be on the floor, hair fanning out like thousands of seeping rivulets? Would her eyes be open, or closed as he pictured? He assumed her cheeks would be sticky with salt and dried water, but would she be smiling instead, one side higher than the other?

Did he want to see?

He located the switch and pushed up with his thumb.